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Visakha Day, '76.

Dear Goh,

Today I received your letter of 8/5, and I still have to answer your previous one. I am happy with your letters, because your questions and remarks are so direct. What was the Vesak Expo like?

You wrote to me about the rising and falling of the abdomen and what a meditator had said to you. You will hear many different opinions and views from different people and you might find this confusing. Therefore I would like to tell you first a little more about what we should do when we hear different opinions and what the Buddha said about this.

In Buddhism we do not follow teachers. The Buddha said that people should find out the truth by considering themselves, searching, testing the meaning of what one has heard and not follow blindly other people. We do not believe in what others say unless we have checked it ourselves. The word faith or belief in the Buddhist teachings does not mean faith in a person, faith (saddha in Pali) means confidence in kusala, in wholesomeness. Certainly, it is wholesome to have respect for teachers, and especially for monks, since they observe the 'sila' of the monk, and they lead a life of contentment with little. But this does not mean that everything a monk teaches is the truth, because a monk is not the Buddha. Monks have different levels of understanding too, and we should test the meaning of all Dhamma we hear, even the Buddha wanted people to test the meaning of what he said. Thus, asking questions is very good in order to find out more. I just received a very inspiring letter from the famous Australian monk Phra Dhammabhadda who resides in Bangkok, but who is now for a while in Australia (I hope you will meet him once). He wrote: "Study more. Listen more. Ask more. Discuss more. Urge others to study, listen, ask, discuss and be aware too." He sent this letter to many. He also said that the factor of enlightenment which is called Dhammavicaya (this is paññā, wisdom) cannot be developed without assiduous questioning.

Thus, what I will say about the abdomen, do not believe me blindly, but while you check and study the teachings, and consider them, you will gradually find out whether it is useful or not.

Also by trying it out yourself. Where does it lead? You will find out whether it brings you nearer to knowing yourself or not. I have heard about it a lot from people, but nowhere in the suttas or in the commentaries have I found that one should concentrate on the abdomen. But I know, in Yoga people do this. Is this meditation, we should call it that.

You write that the meditator had said that concentration on the abdomen is similar to vipassana. Therefore I think it is useful to find out what is exactly vipassana and then one can check what different people say. I try to explain in 'Buddhist Outlook on Daily Life' Chapter one, but this book cannot be read all in one day. It is better to read it a few pages at a time and then reread. I think this book is easier than the bhidhanma book and so on can be an ~~intro~~ introduction to it. Please contradict me where you do not agree, I like to be contradicted because it shows people are considering the truth for themselves. (I know Asian children are taught not to contradict, it is a matter of culture). I think that the aim of vipassana is : seeing things as they are, seeing the realities of our daily life such as seeing, visible object, hearing, sound, and ~~other phenomena~~ ^{other phenomena} as they are: no self in them, only different phenomena (nāma and rūpa) which do not stay. But we are so ignorant of seeing, visible object, hearing, sound, thinking, and we put self in them. Is there no idea of self who sees, self who hears, self who thinks? We are full of self. When the wisdom is developed which sees things as they are the concept of self can be eradicated. However, the development of this wisdom is step by step. You ask me whether I meant that listening and studying are vipassana. No, I did not mean that. Listening, studying and considering what you learnt are a necessary foundation for vipassana. Vipassana itself is directly experiencing the phenomena as they appear through the doors of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body-sense and mind, experiencing them as they are, as not self. ~~But~~ There are different degrees of wisdom (paññā). The knowledge you get from books and from listening is not the same as the direct experience of the truth, but the direct experience of the truth (vipassana) cannot be attained unless there is first study and listening and considering, pondering it over in your mind. Pondering it over, thinking, is not the same as the direct experience of the characteristic of visible object which appears now, of seeing which appears now, of hearing which appears now, of sound which appears now, of thinking which appears now. All these phenomena have different characteristics, they can be directly experienced when they appear, now.

You ask me for a suitable method for vipassana you can use each day, without taking up too much time. Yes, even for vipassana you do not need select a special time. The awareness of nāma and rūpa is not self, no you, it is a mental factor which arises and arises only with kusala citta. Then there is more theoretical understanding first of what to be aware of (see Buddhist Outlook) the next

(awareness) can arise now and then in the middle of your activities of daily life, and you do not stop these activities at all, thus, you do not set aside a special time. That would be even wrong to do because then there is not the right sati, but so-called sati with a lot of self in it who tries to have sati, while the purpose is: lessening of the idea of self. I explained it now in very short words, but of course there is a lot more to be said about this subject. For the moment it would be useful if you start reading just very little every day in 'Buddhist Outlook' and do not expect a lot of result in a short time. We have to be very patient, because sati will arise by itself, when there is enough are conditions for it. That is, when there is the right understanding what sati is, and also it depends on previous lives (which we do not know) whether there was also sati accumulated in previous lives. There cannot be a long moment of sati, it arises and falls away with the *satti citta*, thus, it is there only for a very brief moment and then it is gone, also sati is impermanent, like all phenomena of life. But then, it can arise again and again.

As I tried to explain in a previous letter, the abdomen cannot be directly experienced, it does not have a characteristic which can be directly experienced, thus it is not an object for vipassana. We call many different phenomena together abdomen, but this is a concept, an idea, it is not a reality you can directly experience. Hardness, softness, pressure can be directly experienced through the body-sense, but try this out: can you directly experience through touch the abdomen? Abdomen is a word, an idea we just think about, thus it is not ~~mx~~ a paramattha dhamma, a nama or rupa which can be directly experienced.

It is the same with 'person', in reality there is no person, we cannot directly experience a person, we cannot see a person. What is seen is just visible object, colour, this is experienced through the eyes. We think of person because of experiences in the past and what we have learned. But what we think is not always real, ^{I mean} it is a paramattha dhamma. We can think of realities, and also think of ideas or fictions, things which are not real, concepts. I know that this must sound very complicated to you, but by hearing it again and again it will become clearer. Then it will become clearer to you what the Buddha meant by: no self, no person. What we call body are many different rupas which do not stay, they change each moment. It may be useful to start also with the first chapter of the green Abhidhamma book, where I explain this. You could show this to the monk who will teach you and may be if he likes a copy you could ask

Mr. Jonathan Abbot again.

You said that your friend cannot understand Abhidhamma, but also for this subject one needs patience, not everything can be understood at once. You could discuss together what you do not understand about this book and draw up a list of questions (also about what you do not understand of this letter I am writing now). Asking is the best way to find out, moreover, while you study and consider, the cittas are kusala cittas. Study is a form of bhavana (mental development).

You wrote in a previous letter that you should cultivate upekkha. About this, many people have misunderstandings. They think that they should not have pleasant feeling or unpleasant feeling, but neutral feeling. Who in the world can stop pleasant feeling or unpleasant feeling from arising? These feelings have arisen already before you know it, you cannot send them back. In vipassana one learns to know different feelings as only mental phenomena, kinds of experiences, not as self who feels, no self in it. In vipassana any reality which appears can be object of awareness, no suppressing in vipassana, no forcing. If ^{the practice} ~~it makes~~ a person strenuous, he is not on the 'Middle Way', not practising rightly. Quite some laypeople want to imitate monks, they think it is necessary to lead a quiet life in order to know the truth. This is not the right way. Laypeople should lead their natural life and know the nāmas and rūpas arising in their lives. We shop, we enjoy many things in life, we read newspapers, we relax. Well, if we stop these things there is the self again which desires, is attached to sati and wants to force it by leading a life which is unnatural for that person. This point is very, very important in vipassana. In our great enthusiasm we might be inclined to imitate the monk, we want to study Dhamma all day and avoid shopping, ^{avoid} going out on picnics or swimming. But are there not nāmas, phenomena which experience something and rūpas, phenomena which do not experience anything during all those activities? ^{should we not know these nāmas and rūpas?} We are laypeople because of previous accumulations and we have accumulated a lot of attachment through eyes, ears, and the other senses. It is good to know this attachment when it appears and then we learn that lobha through the eyes is different from lobha through the ears or the nose. So, outwardly, nobody can see the difference between someone who develops vipassana and somebody who does not. Daily life goes on, but paññā can develop. How unnatural, how forced it would be if one shows it off to develop vipassana and behaves differently, that is again the self who desires sati and wants to force it.

And only by not forcing down pleasant and unpleasant feelings can one learn to know oneself. The Buddha spoke about the cultivation of upakkha, but in another sense. There is a cetasika (mental factor) which is 'evenmindedness' and this is not feeling, it is a cetasika which arises with every kusala citta wholesome citta. Wisdom brings more conditions for 'evenmindedness', impartiality, during the short moment it arises. Wisdom also falls away immediately and but it can arise again. Wisdom brings more peace of mind, but it does not mean we have to try, or do anything to force it, that is impossible.

Now your remark about samatha: this is a different method and different aim: moreover it is for those who lead a secluded life. The development is very, very subtle and very difficult and should only be undertaken by those who have great accumulations for it. See Buddhist outlook in daily life: it does not bring detachment from the concept of self.

The concentration on the abdomen quiets the mind the meditator said: what kind of quietness, it may be a quietness which is akusala. When we enjoy silence it is attachment, it is natural, but it is akusala. Thus we should not take it for kusala; we do not suppress it, but know it as it is. People in the time before the Buddha also practised yoga methods, it is not Buddhism.

The Buddha taught about realities, everything which is real and appears through the six doorways. This is a new teaching. Should we not find out more about this? In fact we do not have to call it Buddhism, we can just talk about everything which is real and which can be experienced. Many people do not know that this is Buddhism; they think ^(Buddhism) it is a kind of religion with ceremonies. That is why relatives may jeer at you (as you wrote) they may not understand yet. When we understand our own accumulations more we become much more understanding of other people, we understand better that they have different accumulations and that nobody can force them to think the way we do. We become much more tolerant and this is more pleasant for the others we live together with. If we feel miserable about it, it is our fault, the citta is akusala: there is dosa, aversion with the citta. When there is aversion we cannot help others. Hearing an unpleasant sound is only hearing, it is a citta which is result of our own kamma, it is vipaka-citta which falls away immediately, then very shortly after aversion arises may arise but all these are only different nana, no self who has aversion it is a nana, a kind of experience arising because there are conditions. Can there not be awareness of its characteristic when it appears? That is vipassana, a beginning of it, With metta, Nina.